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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IS KDEM LE PGOV PHUM SY  
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SALLOUKH STONEWALLS, GIVES APOLOGIST  
DEFENSE OF SHIA DEMANDS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 7, the Ambassador and emboff met with Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh to express the USG's mounting concern over the reported contents of a draft agreement between the Siniora government and the Hizballah-Amal bloc that would bring the Shi'a parties back into the cabinet. Initial drafts of the agreement indicate the GOL would give a priori approval to Hizballah actions across the Blue Line, making the GOL complicit in any Hizballah activity. If this were the case, the Ambassador counseled, it would provoke a strong reaction from the United States and the international community of a kind that the GOL would find unhelpful. Salloukh stonewalled in response, claiming he did not know the contents of the draft agreement and that we should wait until we see the final agreement before passing judgment on it. He reaffirmed Hizballah's status as a legitimate "resistance," rather than a militia, and came dangerously close to advocating a GOL policy of kidnapping Israeli citizens to extort desired foreign policy goals. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and emboff met with Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 7 in order to assure the minister of the USG's continuing support for Lebanon's reform agenda, and to express concern over the reported contents of a draft agreement between the Siniora government and the Hizballah-Amal bloc to bring the Shi'a parties back into the Cabinet. The Ambassador also expressed his alarm that while the initial pretext for the walkout was PM Siniora's supposed disregard for consulting his ministers on an international tribunal for the Hariri assassination suspects, the negotiations for bringing the Shia parties back into government now seemed to focus on 1559 and legitimizing Hizballah's status as a "resistance organization." The Ambassador cautioned that any written agreement that legitimized Hizballah as a "resistance organization," exempt from 1559 and the Ta'if Accords, and gave a priori approval to Hizballah transgressions against Israel across the Blue Line, risked provoking strong condemnation from the United States and the international community, not to mention Israel itself.

¶3. (C) Salloukh, rather disingenuously, responded that he had not even seen the draft agreement and was unaware of its contents. He added that any concerns over the agreement's contents should be delayed until we actually see the draft agreement itself. As for the point, quite publicly known, that the focus of negotiations had now shifted from the cabinet's consultative process with the prime minister to Hizballah's status and compliance with UNSCR 1559, Salloukh claimed that this was a natural extension of the negotiations. He also claimed that the "most important part" of 1559 had been implemented, and that any outstanding issues (i.e., Hizballah's arms), were for internal dialogue. In what was to become his primary tactic for the rest of the meeting, Salloukh then shifted blame to Israel, blaming

Israeli airspace violations for the status of the government's dialogue with Hizballah.

¶ 14. (C) The Ambassador countered that declaring compliance with 1559 an "internal issue" only set the stage for future cabinet crises. If Siniora ever discussed 1559 with the UN or international community again, the Shi'a bloc could walk out again, claiming that the prime minister had violated their agreement that 1559 be solved by internal discussion only. As for the recent increase of Israeli overflights, the Ambassador reminded the Foreign Minister that these were undoubtedly in response to unilateral attacks on Israeli positions from Hizballah-controlled territory in the south during November and December of last year. The Ambassador again stressed the seriousness of the USG's concern over any language making the GOL complicit in Hizballah military actions, and suggested that Siniora could sidestep the issue of validating the "resistance" in writing, simply by referring back to the Ministerial Statement released last summer when the present cabinet was formed.

¶ 15. (C) Salloukh's only response was to ask the Ambassador not to worry about an "imaginary" document that hadn't even been released yet, and to suggest that any resolution on these issues would have to be part of a regional agreement because they were the result of regional problems. Turning again to Israel, Salloukh suggested that the USG focus its efforts on the Palestinian issue, "the mother of all problems." The Ambassador counseled Salloukh to be realistic in this time of Israeli transition, and he noted that, with the recent Hizballah attacks and the parachutist incident, Lebanon had narrowly avoided violent Israeli reprisals.

¶ 16. (C) Salloukh then lamented that Hizballah had not been able to capture the Israeli parachutist who landed in southern Lebanon, because it would have "solved the prisoner issue." Salloukh went on to explain, rather smugly, that if Hizballah were to be able to get its hands on another Israeli instead, it would certainly be able to arrange a prisoner swap with Israeli, thus achieving one of Hizballah's longstanding goals of freeing the two remaining Hizballah fighters in Israeli custody. Outraged, the Ambassador cautioned Salloukh that, as a Lebanese government official, he should not advocate kidnapping people for ransom. The GOL should be playing by international rules. He warned that certain politicians in Lebanon would want to use this period to show that they are tough on defense. He reminded Salloukh that Shimon Peres, a moderate Israeli politician, was responsible for the blistering assault on Qana, and that the Lebanese should be very careful to avoid giving the Israelis any pretext for an attack.

¶ 17. (C) Comment: Salloukh has, prior to this meeting, been a more constructive interlocutor than we imagined when the cabinet was formed. It was Salloukh, for example, who took the initiative to put to rest the press stories that Siniora had succumbed to "international dictats" in September, when Siniora headed a delegation to New York and Washington. But our earlier positive experiences aside, it is hard to imagine how the content of this discussion could have been any worse.

Salloukh, like the other four Shia ministers who walked out of the cabinet on 12/12, is clearly following Syrian and Iranian messages to be intransigent. Were the GOL to adopt as policies what Salloukh suggested in this meeting, the GOL would easily be branded a state sponsor of terrorism. We cannot believe that Salloukh actually believed his own arguments, but, whatever he thinks privately, it is outrageous that he made them. End comment.

FELTMAN